

# The End of Seduction: A Few Words About Baudrillard's "Sex"

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I fake so real I am beyond fake,  
Some day you will ache like I ache.  
Courtney Love, *Doll Parts*

In "The Destiny of the Sexes and the Decline of Sexual Illusion" Jean Baudrillard at once mourns the loss of the shimmering artifices and alluring indeterminacies of the seductive gaze, and condemns the emancipatory discourses of sexual identity which for him amount finally to so much "leering" (Baudrillard's word *loucher*, bears the connotations of ogling, squinting, and gawking). The depressing social scene that Baudrillard observes in the wake of these changes in perspective are as lurid as any hyper-reality that one could imagine. Gaping at each other across a gendered divide, Baudrillard suggests, men and women consolidate their respective fantasies of power, knowledge and identity, but only as a prelude to a further and more wide-reaching cultural and psychological disaster, here rather schematically described as "the commutation of sexual polarities." The ensuing situation is profoundly counter-intuitive, not to say iconoclastic, like so many of the social landscapes that now bear Baudrillard's name; it is as if once the sexes get a hard look at each other, abandoning the suspense and the tension of the playfully seductive glances, they in effect hold each other hostage. Sexual difference — which for Baudrillard is, properly speaking, the site of seductive gaming and of illusions that are freed from any nostalgic comparison to a 'reality' — thereby collapses into a field of indetermination where the subject positions designated "man" and "woman" threaten to switch uncontrollably like an alternating current. In a strategic move that remains extremely troublesome for many of his readers, Baudrillard chooses to identify the chief assassin of seduction and the subsequent triumph of sexual in-difference with something called "feminism." An old hand at decoding the stakes, displacements, decoys, and deceptions of seduction (let us not forget that his initial meditation on the beguiling art, *De la séduction*, was written in the late 1970s), Baudrillard has for years warned readers that the positive capacity of each sex to be the bearer of a radical illusoriness had been irretrievably undermined by the politics and the epistemologies of sexual emancipation. For Baudrillard, "feminism" in particular subtly reproduces certain humanistic and melioristic assumptions about sexual identity and the subject, committed, as it is, to giving a voice to that subject's imagined "depths," or,

in his words, to be bringing “out ‘the real woman’ (or the biological or psychological being, conscious or unconscious, that she is supposed to be).” This “outing” *of* and grounding *in* “sex,” he contends, spells the end of its seductive illusions, or, to be more precise, the end of its existence as seductive illusion; in the supposed name of truth and freedom, subject positions instead harden to the point that they become interchangeable, and consequently in-different to the difference that might otherwise keep their radical illusoriness alive.

That Baudrillard continues to speak this way about sex, notwithstanding wholesale shifts in his thinking about many other questions, puts to us just how important “seduction” remains for him as a point of critical leverage on the postmodern condition. A world devoid of seduction and of the illusion of sexual differentiation is a world in which “passion” has been evacuated from “the firmanent of concepts,” as Baudrillard melancholically puts it. Baudrillard writes in an age that has seen the collapse of utopian desires and the breaking of the greatest ideological icons; the commutation of sexual difference is not unconnected to these declines, yet it is one about which Baudrillard is tellingly regretful. It is perhaps worth noting that the single figure who is perhaps most closely identified with postmodern iconoclasm here flirts shamelessly with making a fetishistic idol out of both “the sexes” and the “sovereign” power of “seduction” in whose thrall the chimera of the sexes is said to thrive. Hence the passion of his lament for the end of seductive passion, a lament that it is difficult to read — not to say unacceptable to a majority of feminist thinkers, several of whom have denounced Baudrillard as naive at best, and violently sexist at worst.

Baudrillard suggests that sexual difference was reconceived by the bourgeois order of nineteenth-century Europe as a juridical, political, and ideological construct designed to ward off the strangeness of one sex vis-à-vis the other. Yet the same century nurtures the greatest theorist of seduction in the unlikely form of Søren Kierkegaard, some of whose quasi-autobiographical writings constitute, for Baudrillard, a reflection upon a world of pure sexual gaming, a world that has given itself over to the “genius” of appearances and to the interplay of seducer and seduced. But we know from the ironic narrative of Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* (which is Baudrillard’s pretext) that the scandalous sexual enticements of this world are always already threatened with more banal possibilities. If the first volume (including the infamous “Diary of a Seducer”) affirms the preternaturally postmodern social life that is composed of “guises and disguises,” the

second volume settles out that playfulness with its more sombre insistence on the sanctity of marriage; seduction gives way to the orderliness and productivity of the bourgeoisie. Baudrillard's point is that in the late twentieth century, seductive gaming has met an analogously ignominious fate: "sexuality" has un-sexed, if you will, fragmented into "all its scattered limbs . . . its partial objects . . . its fractal elements." Baudrillard's point is that in the late twentieth century, seductive gaming has met an analogously ignominious fate; "sexuality" has become un-sexed, if you will, scattered into "all its scattered limbs . . . its partial objects . . . in its fractal elements." The substanceless and attractive fantasies of "femininity" and "virility" — as fantasies — are evaporated, and the play of the pure surfaces of a radically illusory "sexuality" is replaced by a leering identity politics anchored in apparitions of essential depths that have forgotten themselves to be apparitions. In a typically hyperbolic way that can only have the most disturbing resonances for Europeans, Baudrillard describes this catastrophe as *la solution finale* [the final solution].

Baudrillard at no point believes in a "natural sexual difference" any more than he upholds a "natural democratic sexuality;" the concept of an entitled difference (one could say a politically founded difference) is summarily denounced as a "democratic platitude," a reference that will not endear Baudrillard to thinkers and activists of human rights. Yet his sensitivity both to the decline of the extreme figures of an entire century's sexual mythology (condensed into the social and psychological form of the hysteric, the *femme fatale*), and to the "virtual end of liberation" (the "orgy is over," as he puts it), has other, more ominous consequences. As he pointedly argues in his recently published *Figures de l'alterite*, when one erodes difference (whether cultural or sexual), when one does not give oneself over to alterity and strangeness and *seduisance* ["seducingness"], one risks inculcating the exclusionary violence whose most tragic social expression in contemporary Europe is racism. Baudrillard's short essay on "The Destiny of the Sexes" is perhaps most valuable for its suggestion that difference of any kind can be eroded precisely when it seems most vociferously to be proclaimed, celebrated, and idolized. The demise of what might be called — with sufficient care — "the racial illusion" is thus in some sense parallel to the decline of the sexual illusion that we see described here, at least insofar as "race" and "sex" are equally vulnerable to the cultural autism and faked altruism that Baudrillard irreverently associates with the politics of identity, whether that identity is "Europe" or "woman."